

## **THE ARMENIAN MONASTERY OF SOURP MAGAR (MAGARAVANK)**

The Armenian monastery of Սուրբ Մակար (Saint Makarios), also known as Արմենոմոնάστηρο or Մակարայ Վանք, is situated in a picturesque location within Plataniotissa forest, about 1½ Km to the west of Halevga, at an altitude of 530 m. Its vast land (nearly 8.500 donums, extending up to the seashore) includes 30.000 olive and carob trees. From the idyllic site of the monastery, one can gaze the Taurus mountain range in Cilicia, especially during the winter.

The monastery was originally founded circa the year 1000 AD in memory of Saint Makarios the Hermit of Alexandria († 395 AD), who according to tradition had spent some time in the region as an ascetic. By 1425, the monastery had come to the possession of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church. Throughout the Frankish and the Venetian Eras, its monks were known for following very strict rules of ascetic life and religious penitence.

During the Ottoman Era, it was known as the Blue Monastery (Կապույտ Վանք, Կեօք Մանասթըր or Mavi Manastır), because of the light blue colour of its doors and window blinds. It was a popular pilgrimage site and a way station for travelers en route to the Holy Land, such as the scientist Hovsep Shishmanian (“Dzerents”): inspired by the outline of the distant Taurus mountain range, he wrote the historical novel *Toros Levoni* in 1875.

The Magaravank served for centuries as a place of retreat and recuperation for Catholicos (Patriarchs) of Cilicia and other Armenian clergymen from Cilicia and Jerusalem, with which it maintained close relations. Amongst these, it is worth mentioning Abbot Mekhitar of Sebaste, the founder of the Mekhitarist Order, who came here in 1695 to convalesce from malaria. In 1901 the National Educational Orphanage students erected a stone monument to honour his visit and the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mekhitarist Order.

In 1642 a firman excluded the monastery from taxation; its terms were renewed in 1660 and 1701. In 1735 renovations were allowed, as they were between 1811-1818, during which the new chapel was built to the north of the older one and was inaugurated on 3 June 1814. The monastery was restored in 1866, 1926 and 1929, between 1947-1949 and again in 1973. In 1926, by commission of the great benefactor Agha Garabed Melkonian, a paved road linking the monastery to Halevga was constructed. The square to the east of the monastery was constructed in 1933 by commission of Catholicos Sahag II. In 1945 the colonial government granted the Prelature kochans (official title deeds) for over 80 plots of land. On 12 June 1966, Archbishop Makarios III visited the monastery and planted an araucaria tree in its yard. In June 1968, Karnig Kouyoumdjian constructed the chapel's new baptistery, as many Armenian children were baptised there.



**Panoramic photograph of the Magaravank the late 1960s**

It appears that the last monks permanently lived here before 1800. Following the Hamidian massacres (1894-1896) and the Adana massacre (1909), some Armenian refugees found refuge at the Magaravank. The National Educational Orphanage, operated by Vahan Kurkjian (also known as “Pagouran”) between 1897-1904, had its summer sessions within the monastery estate, which was used as an Armenian school until 1914. The estate was also used as a summer resort and a camping site for Armenian scouts and students, including students of the Melkonian Educational Institute, many of whom were orphans of the Armenian Genocide. In 1917 and 1918, the monastery was visited by կամավորներ (volunteers) of the Armenian Legion, which was formed and trained in Monarga, Carpass. Up until 1974, a large number of Armenian-Cypriot families resided in the monastery or in houses in its surrounding area during the weekends and holidays.

A major problem was the lack of water. In 1948 a successful borehole (about 300-400 m south of the monastery) was drilled thanks to the efforts of Kapriel Kasbarian, who also donated funds for the erection of the “Archangels” fountain. In 1949, Sarkis and Sourpig Marashlian donated the water distribution network, the turbine and the electricity generator.



**The yard of Magaravank in the early 1920s**

Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a large number of exquisite and priceless manuscripts (the oldest dating back to 1202 and the newest to 1740), as well as numerous valuable ecclesiastical vessels were kept at the Magaravank, before they were moved to Nicosia for safe-keeping. In 1947, 56 manuscripts were re-located to the Catholicosate (Patriarchate) of Cilicia in Antelias and as of 1998 they are kept at the “Cilicia” Museum of the Catholicosate. The vessels are kept at the Prelature in Nicosia, in a special display case commissioned by Nshan and Garabed Arakchindjian in 1986. However, the icons of the chapel (including the miraculous icon of Saint Makarios) perished during the invasion.

The Magaravank was occupied during the second phase of the Turkish invasion (14-16 August 1974). The occupying forces used it to house illegal settlers and



**Postcard showing the Magaravank as it was in 1926**

Left at the mercy of nature and vandals, silent, semi-ruined, desecrated and deserted, the Magaravank patiently awaits for its rightful owners and pilgrims to return in peace...

### **THE MONUMENT FOR ABBOT MEKHITAR**

Vahan Kurkjian (Pagouran) profoundly admired Abbot Mekhitar (1676-1749) and his work. On 8 September 1901 he and the students of the National Educational Orphanage erected a stone monument in memory of Mekhitar's visit to the monastery in 1695 and the 200th anniversary of the foundation of the Mekhitarist Order (established in Constantinople in 1701, they re-located to Modon, Peloponnese in 1703 until they permanently settled to the island of San Lazzaro, Venice in 1717). The monument was erected on a small hill to the north-east of the monastery, ever since known as Մխիթարայ Բլուր (Mekhitar's Hill). In 1904 Pagouran's only son, Mihran, aged 2½ years, passed away and was buried at the ancient Armenian cemetery near the Ledra Palace; due to this unbearable loss, Pagouran closed down his Orphanage and moved to Egypt. Even after that, Pagouran's former students continued to visit the monument every year, in remembrance of their beloved teacher and educator.

30 years after the erection of the original monument, four former students of the Orphanage (Movses Soultanian, Simon Vanian, Armen Bedevian and Rapael Philibossian) replaced the heap monument with an obelisk made of mortar with the help of the local architect Garo Balian, the very same who designed the twin buildings of the Melkonian Educational Institute and the buildings of the National Melikian School and the National Ouzounian School. The monument was unveiled



**The inauguration of Mekhitar's monument in 1931**

8 Սեպտ. 1901 - Ի յիշատակ երկհարիւրամեակի Մխիթար Աբբաօր. Աշակերտք Ազգ. Կրթ.-Որբանոցի Նիկոսիոյ. Վերականգնեցաւ Նախկին 4 աշակերտաց կողմէ Մ. Ս., Ս. Վ., Ա. Պ., Ռ., Փ. 1931:

### **ՄԽԻԹԱՐԱՅ ԲԼՈՒՐ**

Ողջո՛յն քեզ բլուր, բնութեան տաճար,  
յիշատակ թողումք կոթողդ կարկառ Նորընծայ  
անունդ պահե՛ դարե դար, կեցցե՛ լուսաշող մեծն  
Մխիթար: Վ. Զիւրաբեան

military officers; the complex was partly damaged by a fire in February 1997. Between 1998-1999 and again in 2005, the occupying regime intended to turn it into a hotel; thanks to organised reactions by the Republics of Cyprus and Armenia, the Catholicosate, the Vatican and the European Council, this unholy plan was averted.

Thanks to the initiative of the Armenian Representative Mr Vartkes Mahdessian, in co-operation with the Armenian Prelature of Cyprus, under the supervision of UNFICYP, the annual pilgrimage was revived on 6 May 2007, with the participation of about 250 people, including some who came especially from abroad; a second and third pilgrimage were organised again on 10 May 2009 and on 9 May 2010, with the participation of about 200 people each time, while the fourth one is taking place today, 8 May 2011.



**Commemorative photograph of the old monument**

on 2 August 1931 by the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, Sahag II, and the Armenian Archbishop of Cyprus, Bedros Saradjian, in the presence of the benefactors and the families resorting at the monastery.

Up until the 1974 Turkish invasion, the monument and the hill had been popular with pilgrims who visited the monastery, as well as numerous Armenian-Cypriot scouts who used to camp there during the holidays and the summer. Pagouran and his students could be proud for the fact that the occupying Turks have not defaced or pulled down their splendid work - the oldest Armenian monument still surviving in Cyprus - and that their vision continues up to this day, an indelible link with the Armenian presence on our island from the distant past.

The inscriptions on its west and east side of the monument read as follows:

8 Sept. 1901 - In memory of the two hundredth anniversary of Abbot Mekhitar. The students of the Nat. Educ. Orphanage of Nicosia. Reconstructed by 4 former students M. S., S. V., A. B., R. Ph. 1931.

### **MEKHITAR'S HILL**

Hail to you hill, temple of nature, allow your heap obelisk to be a reminiscence that preserves your novice name from century to century, long live the radiant great Mekhitar. V. Kurkjian